



Just off **MAIN STREET**

by Elmaz Abinader

I. Crossing the Threshold

When I was young, my house had a magic door. Outside that door was the small Pennsylvania town where I grew up. Main Street ran in front of our house bearing the standard downtown features: a bank, a news stand, the hardware store, the auto parts supply, and other retail businesses. Families strolled the streets, particularly on weekends looking at the displays of furniture in Kaufman's giant window, the posters for movies hanging behind the glass at the Rex Theatre, and the mannequins, missing hands or fingers, sporting the latest fashions in the windows of my aunt's clothing store. In those days, the early 1960s, the small businesses in a town like Masontown fed the community's needs for food, clothing, and shelter. 1

My family's shops took their positions on Main Street as well: Nader's Shoe Store, Nader's Department Store, and the Modernnaire Restaurant. From the face of it, our businesses looked like any others and we gratefully satisfied the local mother trying to buy church-worthy shoes for the children, the father in for a good cigar and the newspaper, and the after-school crowd, who jittered near the juke box on the restaurant tiles. My father and my uncle stood in the doorways of their establishments, perfectly dressed in gray suits and white shirts, ties, and glossy polished shoes. 2

At that moment, frozen in second grade, at the threshold of the store, I saw no difference between my father, uncle, and the people who passed by. Many of them too sent their children to Mrs. Duffy for piano lessons, shopped at the A&P, and bar-b-qued in the backyard on the Fourth of July. Many of my dad's customers had their children in All Saints School with me. Their daughters had shiny bikes with streamers flowing from the handlebars. The popular girls, Jeannie and Renee, wore freshly polished Mary Jane shoes every day, and discussed quite vocally their ever growing collection of Barbie doll paraphernalia. I listened with fascination to the descriptions of a house for Barbie, her car, and her wardrobe. Jeannie wrapped her finger around her blond pony tail as she described Barbie's ball gown. Renee pulled her spit curl into a C as she showed us pictures of her trip to Virginia Beach. 3

In these moments of social exchange, the illusion of similarity between me and the girls in my class floated away, bubble light. Despite sharing the same school uniform, being in the Brownies, singing soprano in the choir, and being a good speller, my life and theirs were separated by the magic door. And although my classmates didn't know what was behind that portal, they circled me in the playground and shouted "darkie" at my braids trying to explode into a kinky mop, or "ape" at my arms bearing mahogany hair against my olive pale skin. It was dizzying and my stomach squirrel-squealed in loneliness. 4

I dragged myself home to our gray-shingled house on Main Street feeling the weight of my book bag and the heaviness of the differences between me and the girls jumping rope just across the street. As I pulled on the silver aluminum handle of the screen door that led to the hallway of our house, the rust crumbled against my thumb. Nothing was particularly enchanting about this door, but when I entered, the context of the world changed. 5

Drawing me from the entrance, down the hall, to the dining room, was one of my favorite smells. It was Wednesday, the day of the week when my mother covered the table for eight with newspaper, dragged two large blue cans from the pantry, and lined up the cookie sheets. By the time I arrived home from school in the afternoon, the house smelled of Arabic bread and loaves and loaves of the round puffy disks leaned against each other in rows on the table. She made triangles of spinach pies, cinnamon rolls, and fruit pies filled with pears from the trees growing on our land. Before greeting me, she looked up, her face flour-smudged, and said, "There are 68 loaves. You can have one." 6

GLOSSARY

A & P *n.* the name of a popular super-market or grocery store.

Barbie doll *n.* a popular American doll that young girls like to play with and collect.

brocade *n.* a thick fabric woven (often with threads of silver or gold) to form a raised design.

Brownies *n.* an organization for girls aged 6 to 8 that is a branch of the Girl Scouts.

colleagues *n.* people with whom you work and who share your profession.

hierarchy *n.* a way to rank people or things from the highest to the lowest.

The House of Commons *n.* the lower house of Great Britain's parliament, whose representatives are elected by British citizens.

portal *n.* a door or a gate.

melancholy *n.* a feeling of sadness.

mitigate *v.* to make [a problem or condition] less serious or less harmful.

pantry *n.* a small room where kitchen items are kept.

paraphernalia *pl. n.* the things that are used for a particular activity.

perimeter *n.* the outside border surrounding an area.

plaque *n.* a metal plate that has a title, a name, or other information written on it.

slur *n.* a remark that is intended to hurt or criticize another person.

social outcast *n.* a person who is left out of a group because they are considered to be from a lower status or class.

(above) A Pennsylvania town's main street is reflected in the window of a second-hand store.

© AP/WideWorld Photo



By now, my sisters have joined me at one end of the table where we pass the apple butter to each other to slather on the warm bread. When Arabic bread comes out of the oven, it is filled with air and looks like a little pillow; as it cools, the bread flattens to what Americans recognize as “pita” bread. Other bread was rarely eaten in our house; even when we put hot dogs on the grill, they were dropped into a half of “cohbs,” then covered with ketchup.

The smell was hypnotic and mitigated the melancholy I carried home with my lessons to do that night. The revelry ended soon after we finished our treat. Each child of the six of us had after-school duties. My three brothers reported to the store to clean and manage the inventory, and we three girls shared the demands of house and garden. In the summer, we weeded, watered, and picked the vegetables; in the fall, we reported to the basement where we canned fruits, beans, jams, and pickles. Between these seasons were endless piles of laundry, ironing, and cleaning to maintain the nine people who filled our little house. Barbies, coloring books, after-school sports were other children's worlds, not ours.

Behind the magic door, the language shifted as well. Mother-to-daughter orders were delivered in Arabic—homework, conversations, and the rosary, in the most precise English possible. Three things dominated our lives: devotion to God, obedience to our parents, and good grades in school. A sliver of an error in any of these areas was punished with swiftness and severity. The reputation of our family relied on our perfection and my parents had no idea that their struggling-to-be-perfect daughters digested unsavory ridicule from their peers.

Our social interactions on the other side of the door had little weight inside the house. We had a different community who gathered on weekends and during the summer. Relatives from towns around Pennsylvania and Ohio filled our living room and dining room, circling the table crowded with my mother's fabulous array of Arabic dishes: hummus, chick bean dip, baba ghanouj, eggplant with sesame, stuffed grape leaves, shish kebob, kibbee, raw or fried lamb and bulgur wheat patties, a leg of lamb, a turkey stuffed with rice and raisins and platter after platter of side dishes. The famous Arabic bread sat skyscraper high on plates at either end.

My uncle, the priest, blessed the table, and the chatter of Arabic began as cousins dipped

their bread, scooped up the tabouleh salad, and daintily bit the sweet baklava pastry. As the end of the meal approached, we pushed slightly away from the table, as my father told a story of the old days, or someone read a letter from Lebanon; or a political argument snarled across the empty dishes.

We girls cleared the table and Arabic music wound its way out of the record player. Before we knew it, someone started a line dance and others linked arms, and stomping and kicking and clapping shook the house. As children and as worker bees, we were busy, both cleaning dishes and bringing the adults anything they wanted, as well as standing up to having our cheeks pinched and our bodies lifted into the air.

My family scenes filled me with joy and belonging, but I knew none of it could be shared on the other side of that door. The chant of schoolyard slurs would intensify. Looking different was enough; having a father with a heavy accent already marked me, dancing in circles would bury me as a social outcast.

II. Making a Writer

In college, a school one hundred times larger in population than my home town, I walked the campus with a fascination. Past the line of the ginkgo trees, I entered the Cathedral of Learning, the skyscraper at the University of Pittsburgh where the English Department was housed. On the first floor of this beautiful building are the Nationality Classrooms. These rooms are designed to represent different cultural notions of classroom design. The English Room featured benches from the House of Commons, the Hungarian Room presented the paprika-colored panels of flower design set into the wall, and the Chinese Room, dedicated to Confucius, put the students in round tables without a sense of hierarchy. We had some classes in these quarters, often unhappy with the stiffness of the furniture or the care we had to take with our equipment. One room was locked and could only be seen by permission or during a tour. I studied the plaque outside the door. The Syria-Lebanese Room. Here again, a door dividing the outside “Ameri-

ELMAZ ABINADER

Elmaz Abinader is an Arab-American author, poet, and performance artist whose work has appeared throughout the United States and the Middle East. Her most recent volume, *In the Country of My Dreams...*, won the 2000 Josephine Miles PEN Oakland award for multicultural poetry. Her first play, *Country of Origin*, won two "Drammies" from Oregon's Drama Circle, and she toured with her second performance piece, *Ramadan Moon*. Her first book, *Children of the Roojme: A Family's Journey from Lebanon*, is a widely acclaimed memoir of one family's immigration.

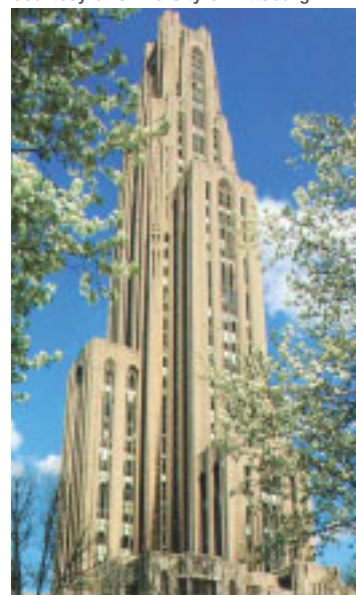
After receiving an M.F.A. degree in poetry from Columbia University and earning a Ph.D. in Creative Writing, Abinader won a post-doctoral fellowship in the humanities that led to work with novelist Toni Morrison on *Children of the Roojme*. Early in her writing career, Abinader won an Academy of American Poets award. Most recently, she was a Fulbright senior scholar in Egypt.

Abinader's poetry was first introduced to the public in *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab-American Poetry*, edited by Gregory Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa. Abinader has produced several commissioned pieces—two commemorating the centennial of Gibrán Khalil Gibran and another honoring the works of musician Marcel Khalife. Many of her works have appeared in anthologies.

A creative writing teacher for years, Elmaz Abinader has focused on the work of young writers of color, particularly through her participation in the Hurston-Wright Writers' Week West and The Voice of Our Nations Arts Foundation. She currently teaches at Mills College in Oakland, California.

(below) **Cathedral of Learning** This skyscraper of the University of Pittsburgh houses the Nationality Classrooms that inspired Abinader.

Courtesy of University of Pittsburgh



can" world from my world. Naturally, I made it a point to see the room, inviting my friends along.

15 At the moment we entered, our breath froze. The room was covered in Persian rug designs, glass multi-colored lights, brass tables, and cushions against the wall around the perimeter. It was lush and exotic and suddenly the pride of being associated with this palace worked its way inside of me. In charge of my own identity in college, I announced my heritage, wrote about my grandmother, cooked Arabic food for my friends, and played the music of Oum Kalthoum at gatherings at my house.

16 It wasn't long before I understood that my display of my Arab-ness served to exoticize me. In the curriculum, nothing of Arab writing was represented; on television, the only person associated with Lebanon was Danny Thomas; and Lawrence of Arabia became the footnote to my culture. Concurrently, the events in the Middle East clarified the sympathies in the United States as not pro-Arab; and as I grew, feelings toward Arabs became more negative and sometimes bordered on distrust, even from my own colleagues.

17 I persisted in my writing. A poem about my mother leaving Lebanon and making a home in the United States, a story about my grandfather living like a refugee during World War I, my father's adventures as a rubber trader in Brazil when he was a young man became my themes, and I intuitively released these stories and poems as if the whole history was bottled up inside of me.

18 Still, my writing was happening inside the door. Outside, in my classroom, in my bachelor's and master's program, some years later, the literature we read was as foreign to my natural sensibility as Barbie was to my childhood milieu. The models for writers included a substantial number of European-identified male authors who wrote eloquently about mainstream American culture. In my writing corner of the world, I penned stories of children dying during the Ottoman siege of our village in Lebanon. I felt music in my poetry that was strange to American ears; my images gathered in a shiny brocade of detail, more lush than other writing of the 1970s.

19 I did not feel welcome outside the door.

20 But I persisted. Somewhere in my journey, I put my hand on a book that made the difference. The title first attracted me: *The Woman Warrior*, and the author had a name that was uncommon: Maxine Hong Kingston. Inside this book, I discovered a grandmother who talked stories, daughters

who were too American for their family; a culture completely strange to the people around them. In essence, this writer knew, she knew, what was inside the door and she wrote about it. This book not only led me to the body of literature available in the Chinese-American canon, but I found African-American, Latino, Native American writers, whose voices resounded about some of the same issues: belonging, identity, cultural loneliness, community, and exoticization.

The strains of my music seeped through cracks and under the threshold, the stomp of the dance pushed the door out of the way. I listened to Toni Morrison in an interview answer the question, "Do you write because of racism?" She said, "I write in spite of racism." Writers were claiming their place not only in literature, but also in the perception of history.

Participating in activism had always been an important part of being a citizen of the United States for me. My years were marked with political causes for which I marched, protested, signed petitions, and organized committees. Now I began to understand: As a writer, I was also an activist. Telling a good story, writing a beautiful poem pierced the reader more deeply than any rhetoric could manage.

In addition, I found a community: American writers and artists of color often travel the same terrain as I do, living with dual sensitivities, negotiating where one culture I inhabit conflicts with my other culture, looking for a place that is home.

Times have been challenging for Arab-Americans because our countries of origin are often embroiled in conflict and political controversy. The more difficult it becomes, the bigger role my good story and my beautiful poem play in contributing to a perspective of the events and the people. Readers will often trust literature more than speeches or articles, and I find that my love of writing is interwoven with my responsibility to write.

I have a new small town. It's not anywhere in particular, or maybe it's everywhere. In this village, people live with their doors open, moving back and forth over the threshold of what has been exclusive to what will some day be inclusive. As a writer, I make my life known and woven into the fabric of literature. As an activist, I look toward other young writers of color and let them know, they might have to lean with their shoulder, put their whole body into it, but if they push on that door it will eventually open.